

Revolution and Rehearsal in the Global South

Unlearning the Archive

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Editorial Note

Revolutions are often accompanied by ideas that presume a sharp delineation between the past, the present, and a future yet to come. According to this linear conception of time, revolution is a break from the past spurred by the promise of the new. Anti-colonial movements often understood social struggle through a similarly linear concept of time. The persistence of global power structures and the nation-state form in particular casts doubt on this promise.

Beyond institutional change, anti-colonial revolution promised epistemological and ethical transformation. Revolution would alter interpretations of the world, the very categories we use to make sense of our surroundings, and, in turn, how we comport ourselves. These different itineraries pose a paradox: What if an epistemological and ethical transformation, a revolutionary change in how we think, requires a break from the pursuit of revolution as the new? Does a practice of rehearsal propose an alternative?

For Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, the archive, too, draws a temporal divide, in this case between the past (which it constructs) and our present. The task of the critic, artist, and intellectual working from within imperial discourses and institutions is to unlearn the archive's technology and think with the dispossessed toward an anti-imperialist project of emancipation. These potential futures require a departure from the logic of revolution as a break and instead invite us to navigate enduring overlaps between past and present.

This roundtable addresses approaches to these overlaps by a group of remarkable critics and creators working between Asia, Africa, and the West. We begin with comments from Azoulay, Sohail Daulatzai, Bouchra Khalili, and Mamadou Diallo, each of whom address the relationship between revolutions and archives in their own practice. A conversation emerges along various situated itineraries across the third world. What does it mean, in practice, to unlearn the archive? What does it mean to do so from the global periphery, the still present specter of a third world?

A scholar, curator, and film director, Daulatzai examines dispossession as a global condition that links populations from the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region to Algeria and the United States. Khalili's prolific, influential works as a visual artist ground reflection on the task of the civic poet from North Africa, ever in conversation with her ancestors. Speaking on behalf of the Chimurenga collective, Diallo elaborates Khalili's observation, weaving stories from Ousmane Sembène to FESTAC to elders on the streets of Dakar. The new, Chimurenga teaches, emerges from remixing stories, from constantly reconstituting the public.

Rehearsal, rather than rupture, describes the rhythm of their conversation. Our interlocutors speak through illustration, reenacting past works and retelling old stories for present company. No single statement is truth.



Insight appears in conversation: a gesture to that other notion of revolution—as return, as that which implies the overlaps in temporality they insist are already there.

—Arash Davari and Elleni Centime Zeleke

Unlearning the Archive

Ariella Aisha Azoulay: Potential History started as a book on revolution. When my editor asked me to cut words, my intuition was that if I cut the chapter on revolution in its entirety, the book would still be coherent. Though I worked on this chapter longer than on the others, I felt that it was still not ready. I started working on this chapter with a kind of revolutionary spirit, wrongly assuming that in order to exit the global catastrophic condition a revolution is needed. I realized in the process that what I had been studying for years—the ruination of Palestine and the creation of the state of Israel—are actually the outcomes of revolution and should be studied as such.

This kind of revolution is materialized in imperial sovereignty, which I posit against worldly sovereignty. This delineation between two types of revolutions and sovereignties led me to recover and elaborate an anti- or non-imperial imagination. Worldly sovereignty cannot be preceded by a revolution but is rather characterized by worldly practices employed by different people in different places as part of their care for inherited worlds and their commitment to protect these worlds from further destruction. And so, I found myself taking a slightly different path. Rather than writing about revolution directly, I was mapping paths to reverse the destruction of the Judeo-Arab world through two colonial projects: the French colonization of Algeria and the Zionist colonization of Palestine that invented the Judeo-Christian tradition.

Unlearning is a necessity and should be taken very seriously, since the technology of the archive operates through us, defining who we are, how we act and interact with others, and our possibilities—or lack thereof—to care for the shared world. The technology of the archive makes us believe that the past exists. The institution of the archive is the site where this invented past is being materialized.

The technology of the archive assigns identities to people. Some are assigned with soft violence like that of the *settler citizen*, others with brutal or genocidal violence like *slave*, *refugee*, *infiltrator*, or the *undocumented*. All of them are political categories defined by the imperial regime and sustained by international laws. It is

through the technology of the archive that these political categories are produced and reproduced, forced and enforced. The imperial regime of the archive socializes people to recognize themselves and others in those imposed political categories, and, entangled with other imperial technologies of violence, people are forced to become the embodiment of those categories.

In *Potential History*, I try to change the image that we have of archivists. Rather than continuing to assume that the archivists are those people who are dealing with documents already stored in archival spaces, I point to the archival work and violence perpetrated by enslavers or expellers. In those situations of genocidal violence, there is always someone taking record (see fig. 1).

The papers produced when people are being deported, traded, or enslaved are actually lethal documents that operate as a verdict. When archivists hold such documents, raise their hands, or remove the papers from the scene, the people targeted by them are being relegated to “the past,” and they are forced to inhabit what archival violence states they are—“slaves,” “refugees,” or “undocumented.” From the moment that a paper is signed by those that authorized themselves to produce archival documents worthy of being preserved, a person is forced to be the embodiment of a slave, refugee, or infiltrator. Take the mass expulsion of people as an example—once they are pushed outside of an existing border or a border that is being drawn, they become “refugees.” The category of refugee actually replaces the one of expellee, which still carries the thread of accountability for the crime of deportation.

The archive is the technology that makes things belong to the past, since it is the incarnation of this separation between tenses. Since we are all shaped by and operators of this technology—obviously under different capacities and roles—the processes of unlearning must involve the unlearning of this separation, which shapes our onto-epistemological faculty to be in the world with others.

Sohail Daulatzai: Through a range of media, my work to this point has been about interrogating the authority that the archives of empire seek to claim. And so I have been deeply invested in recovering and reimagining the redemptive entanglements and encounters that have been forged in this crucible of violence. This has led me more recently to want to extend these ideas and practices into what I’m calling the “ghost archive”—and to sharpen and trace the contours of this insurgent space.

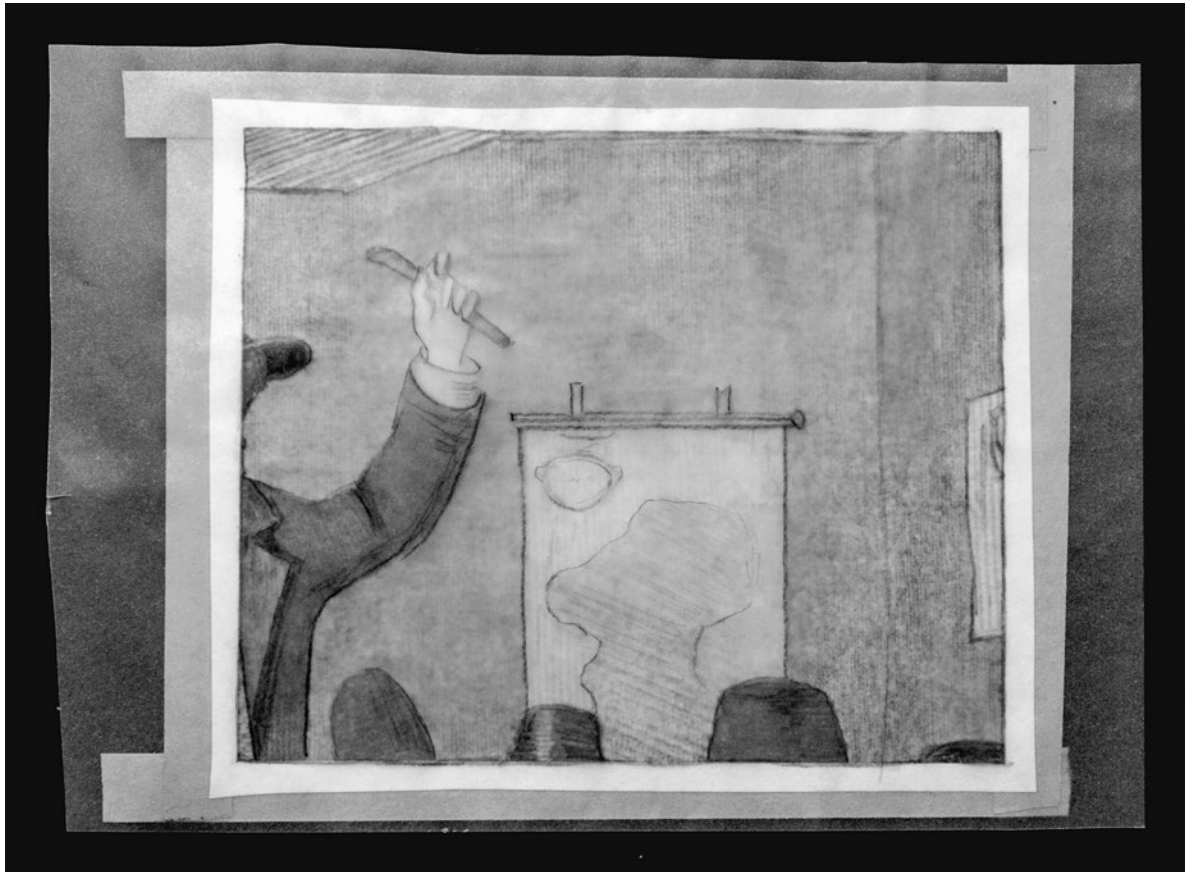


Figure 1. The enslaver as an archivist, tracing. Photograph by Ariella Aïsha Azoulay.

I have always been deeply influenced by John Akomfrah, who in 1986 made a film called *Handsworth Songs* about the uprisings in England during the 1980s. At one point one of the participants says in the film: “There are no stories in the riots. Only the ghosts of other stories.” That quote has haunted me ever since, and it informed my approach to the video I directed in 2019 for the group Algiers, where I attempted to give visual resonance to this ghost archive by creating a video with no story, only the ghosts of other stories.

The video, which is for the song “Dispossession,” is my attempt to radically interrogate if not destabilize the archive of the now—what might also be called an imperial archive—and what that archive claims to represent. I wanted to create a piece with a spectral existence, one that indexes or at the very least gestures to an/other archive. That other archive is not just about loss and dread but also about defiance in the face of “a violence that isn’t past,” a violence that never ceases to be, a violence that is not understood today as empire or even violence, but instead as a war for “humanity” and “civilization”—which today is euphemistically called

the war on terror. So that for me, the video was our war against oblivion, the acts of erasure by them, whoever “they” are, and of remembrance by us.

While *Handsworth Songs* is about battling erasure, it’s also about the ghostly entanglements that give rise to the world as we “know” it. The video for “Dispossession” acts as a kind of palimpsest, a visual map of traces, a spatial and temporal catalog. I’ve always been deeply inspired and influenced by militant cinema and drawn to Kodwo Eshun and Ros Grey’s concept of “cine-geographies.” I was trying to create a visual language that borrowed from that tradition, an insurgent form that disrupts seemingly orderly and organized historical accounts, to invite an unruly specter to the linear narrative of history that claims the past is past, and to question how we think about space, geography, and time.

“Dispossession” opens with the lyric, “Run around, run away from your America while it burns in the streets / I’ll be here standing on top of the mountain shouting down what I see.” There is an active witnessing in that lyric, a testimony that has a liberatory impulse that taps into a rich vein of history for what the mountaintop

Figure 2. Still from
“Dispossession” music
video, dir. Sohail Daulatzai,
at Les Arènes de Picasso,
Noisy-le-Grand, Paris, 2019.



redemptively signifies in Black political cultures in the United States. While the Atlanta-based band Algiers might sing “Dispossession” from and about twenty-first century America, I was hoping to place their song in a longer history of dispossession, of racial capitalist violence and enclosure. I wanted to thread together images in the video that index the various sites where dispossessions wrought by colonial violence continue to take place.

Of course, dispossession comes with many connotations, for instance the Marxist materialist idea of alienation from labor and an eradication of the commons. There’s also a Fanonian ontological signification, of the native alienated from the self. And then there’s the context of dispossession used in Palestine, which is why I closed the video with a poem by Mahmoud Darwish: “Nothing is harder on the soul than the smell of dreams when they are evaporating.” Finally, dispossession suggests ghostliness—to be possessed or *dispos*sessed, to be exorcised, emptied, or abandoned. I tried to play on all these registers, to use the song as an act of witnessing of an unfolding past, present, and even futurity.

The video opens with shots of the locations where Algerians were dumped into rivers during the 1961 Papon Massacre, a seemingly idyllic and serene landscape in Paris. I wanted to strike an immediate contrast with this band named Algiers from twenty-first century America, a place that has its own settler-colonial and slave-structuring logics. What could it mean to bring these two histories or overlapping moments together?

The video is an attempt to think about these kinds of ghostly entanglements. What do the disappearances of Algerians during the Papon Massacre in 1961 have to

do with the CIA’s so-called black sites, drone strikes, Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo, and the Forever War today? What does Paris and the banlieue have to do with a band from Atlanta? What does the legacy of Black internationalism embodied in James Baldwin, the Black Panthers, William Gardner Smith, and others have to do with a history of anti-colonial defiance in Algeria and Palestine? (see figs. 2–3).

In gesturing to a “ghost archive” and probing the imperial archive, I was trying to disrupt the discursive space this imperial archive tries to represent—as Ariella just pointed out—how it tries to classify, discipline, and shape. I wanted to disrupt it by disassembling the archive from its pastness and reassembling it into a spectral space of the present, a prelude to something else. To me, that something else is compelling. We are led to believe that the past is past, that what we are is what we are. I’m interested in the possibility that, as Frantz Fanon suggested, we are or can be what we were and more. That *more* really interests me. I was trying to forge and give shape to this ghost archive by asking, what kind of a subject can be produced or can emerge out of these entanglements or these encounters?

Bouchra Khalili: If I had to define my relationship to archival history in relation to revolutions from non-Western countries, I would start with a simple question: What does it mean to remember? How do we remember? And what is left to remember?

In my case, unlearning starts with my lineage and my heritage as the daughter of parents who were born colonized and who were the first generation to access education after the independence. I’m from Morocco, which has its own complicated colonial history. Like millions of other Moroccans, North Africans, and



Figure 3. Still from “Dispossession” music video, dir. Sohail Daulatzai, Monument to Ali La Pointe, Hassiba, and Petit Omar, Algiers, 2019.

Africans, I came from a family who had no family photo albums until the sixties. You speak in your work, Ariella, about photography as a colonial technology. The fact that millions of individuals born under direct colonial rule and their descendants have no family albums illustrates your point. The first photographs in my family album are taken from the sixties, most of which were necessitated by the establishment of a postcolonial state: ID cards issued to newly independent Moroccans. After that began an extraordinary tradition of photo studios in North Africa. But before the nineteen sixties, there are no pictures.

There is, however, something else: stories. Before learning about the history of decolonization and the history of struggles against colonialism from history books, I learned the stories that were handed down by my mother and my grandmothers and my great-grandmother whose relatives were involved in the movement of liberation. This pertains to the, let’s say, thousands-year-long history of North African historiography as an essentially oral practice. It is a past handed down by women at home. It’s strange to frame it like this, but what I am describing is quite literally a feminist practice. Women are the ones who have to share and transmit the story, to perform a civic, political, and social responsibility, as it were. The story starts from the history of the tribe and goes on to include the history of the location and the country. Of course, the struggle against colonization was also part of their charge.

It was women who taught me the history of the struggle against colonization in Morocco and North Africa. Under French and Spanish colonization, the inhabitants of this region were still connected to each other. They traveled from one place to another in North

Africa, and the stories traveled with them. These mostly illiterate North African women were the public writers of the silenced history of colonial nations. Friends from Algeria have recounted exactly the same experience: a feminist practice of transmitting history, of true storytelling, that seems to belong to the North African context. Somehow, from the very beginning of colonial history in North Africa, women practiced Ariella’s idea of unlearning imperialism.

I see myself, much like these women, as a storyteller and also as a sort of public writer. When I was a teenager, after my parents migrated from Morocco to Paris, I was a public writer in French for my mostly African neighbors who worked in the trades. It was something that I used to do quite literally, which I suppose has influenced my current conception of producing works with words, speech, images, and sounds. In my practice, the stories sometimes appear in complex forms, with multiple layers, narratives, and combinations of images as well as sounds from various sources. Nevertheless, oral speech remains central, at least in the works with film and video.

There is another type of storytelling that is native to North Africa and that is unfortunately a dying tradition in Morocco called *al-halqa*. In Arabic, *al-halqa* refers to the circle that the audience would form around storytellers. The storyteller would suddenly appear in a public square, an open-air space, or market, and call passersby to stop and form a circle around him. One can see it as a sort of civic apparatus: he is forming the community of listeners to whom the story must be transmitted. His performance is a hybrid of various stories and sources that come from the Sunna and Qur’an mixed with popular tales and political and social parables

about the current situation. It is essentially a form of heterogeneous storytelling and includes a combination of stories that can vary. No story is ever similarly performed.

I was a huge fan of it when I was a kid and used to attend often. I was amazed first by the skills of the storyteller, his ability to memorize all of those stories and to never exactly repeat the same performance. He always made it a point to reinvent the technique of mixing tales and stories. The way I approach the various types of material in my work in film and video is similar to this approach. Using heterogeneity as an engine for storytelling, I approach “the archive” as a traditional storyteller in Morocco would.

In *Foreign Office*, for instance, I used photographs but I never considered them archives. First of all, the photographs are quite literally accessible to anyone. I don’t show anything that hasn’t been seen before. Second, for me they are pictures more than anything else, and not necessarily a trace or traces of the past. They are the potential material that can allow the production of a form of historiography that doesn’t only speak for the past, but also speaks for a potential future yet to be achieved. When the young Algerians in the film speak, charged with the task of narrating the story and thus taking on the burden of history, they do not refer to the past, but rather to a potential future yet to come into being. They are talking about a new potential civic community that still needs to be formed. That’s how the piece and many of my works relate to colonial history or postcolonial history—to moments in history concerning collective emancipation. More than a discourse about a forgotten or lost past, they are meditations on a potential future and a potential civic community yet to come into being, operating as a civic apparatus like the *halqa*. That’s precisely why the *halqa* happens outside, in the space shared by all Moroccans in their everyday lives.

There is a sort of division here between the *halqa* in public space and the side of history taught by the women at home. Nevertheless, I’m very much attached to the idea that historiography, at least in the North African context, is essentially a feminist practice because it’s also the practice meant to teach future citizens. I’m speaking of a time during which we were not citizens, when Morocco was still a colonial possession and occupied by imperial powers, but also in the aftermath of independence when still we were not citizens—which brings me to what Ariella said about revolution and colonial history. I produced works like *Foreign Office* and *Twenty-Two Hours* to address failure. Ariella, you speak

about your father’s failure upon joining a revolution. The aftermaths of independence in North Africa can also be seen as failures in the sense that the newly independent nations ended up replicating the model of the nation-state shaped by Western and European countries. These pieces [*Foreign Office* and *Twenty-Two Hours*] are my meditations on the construction of nation-states as a kind of failure given the struggle for independence against colonization.

Mamadou Diallo: Listening to Ariella made me think the archive has at least two different functions. She presented the archive as a technology for providing or denying identity, substantiating or denying the existence of homelands—the archive as naturalizing socially constructed categories. We can speak about the archive in another sense: as a place visited by scholars looking for receipts. Scholars tend to go to the archive to find evidence, and those archives are a kind of cemetery. Social scientists, historians, and the like go there to conduct autopsies so as to speak authoritatively on things that are not anymore. They deal with dead matter.

I suppose there was a moment in the history of Black discourse where that sort of archival practice could have been the site of urgent and relevant struggle in response to imperial racism and its banning of the Black subject from the project of enlightenment. For very practical political reasons, the writing of a substantive Black historical present seemed urgent and important. I’m thinking, for instance, of the Ibadan school in West Africa and people like the historian Kenneth O. Dike who insisted on a scientific method. Dike felt that scholars like W. E. B. DuBois lacked historical methodology and its requisite technology. And he felt that mobilizing that sort of historical know-how, à la Leopold van Ranke, could help retrieve African precolonial agency, even through European sources if need be.

That is not what Chimurenga does. Chimurenga is an arts collective that started in the early 2000s, the product of a generation of Africans from different parts of the continent that happened to be in the same country, South Africa, a few years after majority rule was established in the early 1990s. That generation went on to do other things in other parts of the continent, for instance, the literary magazine *Kwani* in Kenya. I joined Chimurenga sometime in 2016. Since its inception, it has been digging in and putting together repositories of unfinished business. Rather than the archive—that repository of dead and packaged things—we’ve been interested in memory; more precisely, what do we do with a present that is catching up to a past that haunts

it? Memory is a collection of unfinished business. It's the elders' passions, frustrations, and hopes passed down to us. To borrow from the poet Birago Diop, who paid attention to his predecessors, "the dead are not dead." So, for instance, Chimurenga uses the newspaper form as a device to punctuate and define time as we see fit. In a way, that is what all newspapers do: they show up every day with the pretense of stating what matters today.

I want to speak about Chimurenga's approach through the works of Ousmane Sembène and from personal experiences, or a moment in Dakar when many things unfolded that make the collective's approach immediate and palpable for me. Sembène, like Chimurenga, was obsessed with memory in his work, a lot of which had to do with unfinished business. I'm tempted to put many of his films under the rubric of a history of the present. My entry point is *Ceddo* (1977), but there are other films such as *Emitaï*, which came out in 1971 and portrays resistance against France in southern Senegal during World War II, or *Camp de Thiaroye*, released in 1988, about another dramatic colonial episode situated after World War II. All of these films are exercises of a kind—narratives of what led us to our present rather than simply depictions of the past as a foreign country. All of them were political interventions in the present of Africa.

There is in Sembène, in *Ceddo* especially, a depiction of Africa and Islam as alien to each other. The film partakes in an Afrocentric perspective marked by hostility toward Islam. I do not share this position, and yet, despite it, what I find extremely valuable in Sembène as both an artist and political subject (and those were never dissociated in him) has to do with his tone, his attitude toward authoritative fields of knowledge production. He was always, even up to the very end, irreverential.

Sembène did not go to formal school for long. Legend says he was kicked out after he slapped a French school director. He was, before Eazy, Cube, and Dre, a Negro with an attitude. He educated himself with the workers' movement in Senegal; in the port of Marseille, where he was a dock worker; and later in the Soviet Union. Sembène emancipated himself from the conventions of chronology, linear time, and the dominant filmic aesthetic of his time. He chose to make films rather than write books for political reasons—because he could speak to a larger crowd in them. This may have to do with his Soviet training: he was totally removed from the French conception of *l'art pour l'art* (art for the sake of art). Asked about the chronological coordinates

of *Ceddo* when it was released, he said, "I can't give a date; these events occurred in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and are still occurring." In other words, and this is my point, Sembène is preoccupied with a past that has not finished being present.

There is a scene in *Ceddo* that has a flash-forward—I don't know if that is a legible term, but it's certainly not a flashback, it's a flash-forward. The scene gets us from somewhere in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as he said, to a shot of the fresco under the dome of Dakar's cathedral and then to a vibrant scene of mass in Popenguine, where up to today, every year, Senegalese Christians congregate for pilgrimage.

That scene is just one illustration—and arguably the most visually and sonically impressive one—of the fact that he refuses to think of time as something that should be cut into ordered pieces. We can contrast Sembène's treatment of history with the way that Hollywood, for instance, has dealt with the history of American slavery. Hollywood buffers that history from our present and relegates it to the past. Sembène, to the contrary, pushes us toward a relationship with the past, a relationship that nourishes actually living lives and that can feed into our labors of love as well as our continuing struggles. It is not the sort of taxidermy that results from concepts of history as the matter of a dead past.

And so, Sembène gives us a method and an attitude. His idea of the past is all but passé. He once said that historians are *cronophage*, that they literally consume time. He also told us that we should refrain from fetishizing those practices and disciplines, such as history, that Europeans came up with at some point in the nineteenth century and erected as totems of a so-called civilization—a civilization that we know is predicated on global exploitation.

Ceddo is part of our archive at Chimurenga because it is part of our repository of unfinished business—because some sisters and brothers had been thinking about it and we all got together in conversation. That conversation led us to walk Sembène's path in today's Dakar, to places that he and his team scouted and eventually filmed. We sat with elders, and those conversations were not bounded by time or framed by theme. We made space for the encounter and all the possibilities that come of it. Eventually, this led us to a different kind of unfinished business, one that spoke a lot about Sembène's location as well as ours today in the political economy of Francophone West Africa.

Sembène's most important film is nowhere to be seen, because it was never made into a film. It was a

decade-long labor of love, a historical saga depicting the life, victories, and ultimate defeat of the Almamy Samory Touré of the Wassoulu Empire, a polity that in the late nineteenth century brought together parts of present-day Sierra Leone, Cote d'Ivoire, and Burkina Faso. Samory was a formidable enemy to the French. His grandson, Ahmad Sékou Touré, would follow in his footsteps by saying no to France in 1958 and yes to emancipation.

Among the surviving traces of the film that never became a film, beyond the memories of those who worked with Sembène, are three voluminous tomes of the script and the maquette of one of his greatest battles. The films that Sembène *did* do tell us a lot about his work. It seems to me, however, that the one he never managed to get funding for—although his tenacity was legendary—is the one that tells us the most about both his life and our current circumstances. When it comes to Sembène, the film that was never made, the film on Samory Touré, is our most urgent unfinished business. It's the film we should live from and shape the present with. It is the repository.

Ariella's notion of unlearning is very interesting, especially for thinking with the elders and some of the things that they did. How can we learn from that? Maybe we can look for those practices and attitudes that were particularly unbearable to imperialism, even something like music, for instance. A few years ago, in a Dakar art space called Kër Thioossane, the historian Mamadou Diouf reminded the audience of Ivoirian writer Bernard Dadie's observation that what the colonizer really couldn't stand was the noise of drumming in the night. The sounds that we welcome with delight was cacophony to them. Maybe music in today's Africa is the space that has retained that ability to be unapologetically emancipated from all that we have to unlearn.

AAA: I am struck by the way that all of us spoke about the past as something that is not sealed, and shared our different modes of struggling against the imperial condition that relegated those who are no longer with us to "the past." Unlearning the past as a condition, requires from us—or gifts us with—some modesty, humbleness, and understanding that the world didn't wait for us to come with visions for the future, but rather with attention, care, and a sense of repair toward the worlds that our ancestors cared to protect.

Against Alternative History

Elleni Centime Zeleke: To further that point, Ariella, I think what Mamadou said connects with your critique

of archival practices. You're not interested in an alternative history or filling out the silences of the archive, as if discovering something that's been hidden. Could you speak to that?

AAA: The imperial archive incentivized scholars to unearth its documents and produce alternative histories. Alternative to what? To the major threads of the course of events imposed through much violence. It is the same imperial regime of the archive that dictates that documents will be concealed for several decades and classified "confidential" that invites scholars to read them later and use them to fill in the blanks that imperialism imposed. The question is how to withdraw from the premises of such a configuration of history and how to undermine the status of the document as the ultimate validation of what happened. We often know more than we think about imperial violence without going to the archive, since we are living in its lingering consequences and we are surrounded by people whose experience of imperial violence is incommensurable with imperial temporality, periodization, and terms. The archive interpellates us to visit it, to wait for the release of censored documents, to trust it, to find receipts in it—as you called them, Mamadou. This directs us to look for orders that were given to exercise this violence, as if in the absence of a document in which orders were given, the violence cannot be validated.

Potential History's point of departure is rather the different anti-imperial voices and practices that opposed imperial violence, to conceptualize them in a way so that key terms like *sovereignty*, *revolution*, *archive*, or *art* will be defined by them and not by imperial technologies and institutions. The challenge is not to provide an alternative history of art, or unearth other artists that were not yet shown in the museum, but to abolish the museum that dominates the understanding of art as a non-worldly practice pursued by individuals and whose objects are destined to be displayed rather than being part of community life. *Potential History* doesn't try to show that there was modernity here or modernity there, but rather attempts to show that modernity is an imperial crime and seeks to revive other modalities of making art, on their own terms.

BK: It's important to speak of specific contexts, at least when speaking about Morocco and probably North Africa. Similar questions were regularly debated in North Africa in the immediate aftermath of independence. Decolonizing our practices was the very first question that cultural producers and practitioners sought to answer. And they saw the thing that we're calling here "alternative historiographies" not only as

a potential history but also as a potential *practice* that they could develop to answer the question of decolonization. This included how history is written by those who descend from colonized people.

Most of the roundtables and contributions in *Souffles* magazine¹ asked, “How do we decolonize? How do we decolonize our literature, how do we decolonize our poetry, how do we decolonize our coming cinema?” The magazine was created to answer that question. Now that we are an independent nation and we are standing in solidarity with still-colonized countries, it is urgent that we answer the crucial question of producing decolonized art and culture. Somehow, we are still trying to figure out how to answer that question. It has been haunting us collectively and also individually as researchers and as artists as well as some of us in the diaspora. We try to answer with the things we produce, whether they are artworks or books or communications.

One of the main tasks of the founders of and contributors to *Souffles* magazine was to literally collect those oral narratives I referred to before. They understood those narratives not only as a form of cultural memory, but also as cultural resistance, one of the weapons that people used. To take another example, Muhammad Shafiq traveled in the Middle Atlas to record the hundreds of songs that women would sing and compose to support the armed resistance. These women told the epic of the armed resistance as it was waged. What they were trying to do is different from what is today called oral history. They were just as interested in the stories themselves as in the making of those stories, the linguistics and semiotics of the production. This relates to the multilingual context of Morocco, which often mixes languages, and also the tradition of Amazigh storytelling, which hugely impacted Moroccan novelists and poets well after independence. Projects like *Souffles* approached multilingualism from a decolonial perspective, as a way to critique the imposed uniformization brought about by the use of Standard Arabic in the educational system and the media. Seen from Morocco, at least, the question of language is also crucial to decolonizing cultural practices, education, knowledge, and so on.

SD: The fiction about the pastness of history and what is “alternative” becomes a kind of chimera, almost like a ghost itself, one that is deeply troubled by my personal history. I was born in the same place as generations before me and it has been called very different things: Afghanistan, India, Pakistan, FATA (Federally Administered Tribal Areas), and now “AfPak.”² For me,

being from this deeply contested region has meant that the map has literally not been the territory, which is not only why I have such a deep skepticism of nationalism. It has also meant that for me geography and space are profoundly contingent and relational in my understanding of time. And this has deeply informed my practice as I attempt to think about transnational, international, or even non-national affiliations and encounters—about how archives tend to be not only racially and gender-bound but also nationally bounded. So what does it mean to think about an archive—or even history—beyond these received categories? And what implications does this have for rethinking the pasts, presents, and futures that we are seemingly so bound by?

MD: I don’t think we can frame what Chimurenga has been working on as alternative histories at all. The idea of alternative history sounds to me like a purely intellectual exercise. Take Chimurenga’s FESTAC project, for example, as a contrast.³ The point of that publication was not to tell the history of what happened in Lagos for the FESTAC ‘77 events in 1977 in any authoritative way, or to revisit that history so as to provide the definitive narrative of what happened. It was rather a remixing of that event through memory, through present living memories. We *do* go into different archives and spend time there. But we always try to write against this notion that what has been kept in the archive, organized there, is somehow more authoritative than, say, a piece of fiction written today about the event. We would present both without any hierarchy between those documents. And we would ask, what are the stakes, today, of whatever event or historical process that we are dealing with?

AAA: The invention of the past enables the technology of the archive to determine that all imperial crimes are over. Never mind that people continue to suffer from them; never mind that people demand return or reparations. Archives turn their voices to sound as if they were coming from the past. Scholars can repeat the claimants’ demands—“Hey, you took something from me!,” whatever this “something” may be—but with the technology of the archive, the claimants are denied the possibility to utter them in the present. The question of a strike against the archive is thus crucial—how do we engage with what was made past as present, and turn it into a burning issue of overdue repair, reparations, and return, a way to oppose the command to move forward?

The term that Mamadou introduced when describing Sembène, a *flash-forward*, speaks to going

backward in order to go forward. I think about it in terms of practice—to errata, *errata in retro-prospect*. The question is how do we integrate that in each and every engagement with our others in this world, a world organized by an imperial condition? How are we mobilizing our commitment to return, in the question of Palestine, for example? How are we mobilizing restitution in relation to people who are claiming what was taken from them—lands or objects, etcetera? How are we bringing about repair and reparations in terms of big waves of migration, of people whose documents are here in our museums in the form of objects, and who are being termed *undocumented* and are hence those who can be eliminated or arrested or have their children taken from them? How do we unlearn the past in order to join others in struggles that are not over yet? Not in order to fill the blanks, not in order to produce an alternative history, but to undermine the possibility of history, and undermine the condition where history can be made.

The New

Arash Davari: There is a striking sentence in Ariella's book that reads, "The pursuit of the new defines imperialism."⁴ The book talks about rehearsal instead. One might imagine third world revolutions as attempts at invention in places where people are otherwise seen as derivative. Is there a tension between projections of a liberatory future and the rehearsals, resignifications, and performances of the past? Are there places in your works where you pursue a kind of break? How do you think of emancipation if not as the pursuit of the new?

SD: The question of the new is a fraught one—not because I think it's necessarily imperial, but rather because I wonder how we define the new. It makes me think about Cornel West's response to Frederic Jameson regarding "the prison house of language." West implored us to also think about "the slaughterhouse of history"—the violence of enslavement, colonization, imperialism, and empire.⁵ That yes, language is a prison house, but history also created a slaughterhouse that we still have to contend with, and that shapes and even limits for many of us who are outside of the regime of whiteness the kinds of languages we can deploy, let alone even have access to. Given this, what then is the "new?"

Today I think we're very much trapped within the nation-state system that is both our prison house and our slaughterhouse. Creating cacophonies, to recall

a term Mamadou used, or choruses of voices that transcend if not subvert the nationally bounded system of the archive is really compelling. But being born in one liminal zone ("AfPak") and growing up in another contested region (Los Angeles) has me deeply invested in mapping geographies on this "compass of suffering,"⁶ to borrow from Aimé Césaire, and ultimately to create a kind of assemblage. And out of this assemblage—of forms, of words, of images, and of sounds—maybe something that we can call "new" might emerge.

BK: Many of us here have spoken about being haunted and being ghosts, and I am somehow happy that none of us has mentioned *Hauntology* by Jacques Derrida. I used to refer to it years ago. I came across it again recently with a beautiful poem by Pier Paolo Pasolini, who is one of my biggest influences when it comes to the question of language as well as the question of the civic. Pasolini talks about civic poetry and the civic poet as the political and critical function of the artist or writer in a society. The poem starts with, "I am a force of the past, only to the tradition goes my loss," or something like this.⁷ If I had to define my relationship with the past, then it could only be a past that carries a revolutionary force in the present and for the future—which then could mean that it is yet to be achieved, that it is still resonating in the present time and still calling for a potential future.

I do work with performance as well, but performance with and through nonperformance, and often with individuals who perform themselves but, by performing themselves, are very much conscious that in their singular position they also embody a collective one. If I had to address my work with performance, I would say: if languages and unwritten languages are so crucial in my practice, it's because those were likely the languages spoken when those potential revolutions were discussed at the moment when they were happening.

Sohail talked about the nation-state. I want to speak about it, again, in reference to the failure of independence, specifically the failure to propose an alternative to the nation-state. The two main protagonists in my film *Foreign Office*, for example, are two young Algerians who speak multiple languages, two of which are Algerian Arabic and Kabyle, the Amazigh language spoken in Algeria. The film stages something that is literally impossible today in Algeria because of the decision made following independence to institute Standard Arabic as the language of the new nation-state. Similar decisions were made in Morocco and in Tunisia as well as in Egypt. I make a point of having those languages spoken in my works—because they were the languages

of those who fought for independence and they were the languages that were suppressed after independence.

The simple fact of performing those languages shows how independence could have happened, taking into consideration the great diversity of those regions. The performance becomes a meditation that bears witness to a past that didn't fully achieve itself as well as to a potential future if the struggle for independence and the decolonial process were fully achieved. These performances are typically of situations that could happen in everyday life on a regular basis but that today, sixty years after the independence of most African countries, remain absent.

AAA: Sohail, you spoke about creating cacophonies. Yes, cacophonies, but is it us who create them? Is it us who invent cacophony as a "new" form? Unlearning the "new" is a refusal to fall into the trap embedded in liberal arts premises and expert positions that invite artists, curators, academics, and photographers to forget about the destruction of the condition of plurality and come up with "brilliant new ideas." As Bouchra just described, independence didn't bring an end to this destructive impulse. However, though many languages were under threat, people did not let them die. Performing those two languages in *Foreign Office* is already unlearning the one new imposed language.

I brought a photograph that I would like to share (fig 4).

It is one of several photographs of protests against the partition of Palestine that took place simultaneously in Palestine and in several different Arab countries. For several years I read the caption literally—a protest of Egyptians in November of 1947, in Cairo, against the partition. A few months later, when the state of Israel was created and its imperial sovereignty recognized by the UN, those protesters will be described as enemies of the state, as if its creation were not disputed. Egyptians protesting the destruction of Palestine will be described as "the Egyptian army coming to destroy the state of Israel." This is the imperial distortion of temporality that turns the new state into something that was already there and those who oppose its establishment are its historical enemies. From the moment the new state is created, the opposition to partition is no longer allowed, since this question—yes or no to partition—ought to be over, for imperial sovereignty to rule.

It was only when I came across the anti-Zionist Jewish organizations that were active in Cairo at the time—as in other Arab countries where Arab Jews lived—that I could see the photograph differently and liberate it from this distorted imperial temporality. It ceased to be a photograph of an Egyptian protest, as if Israel and Egypt are already in a relation of enmity, and I could start to see the crowd of protestors as consisting also of Jews, Egyptian Jews who were equally opposing the destruction of Palestine and its partition. Looking at this photograph was helpful in reclaiming identities that were made impossible



Figure 4. Anti-partition protest in context, Cairo, 1947. Image created by Ariella Aïsha Azoulay.

for Jews—“Palestinian Jew,” or “Algerian Jew”—and recognizing myself in them, situating myself in an anti-imperial temporality that enables me to join Arab Jews’ ancestors in these protests and keep them alive. Such rehearsals are necessary not to invent Arab Jews or anti-Zionists as new positions, but to acknowledge the existence of these positions from before Zionism imposed itself as the only future of the Jewish revolution in Palestine.

MD: This idea of the new as a break from the old, or some kind of new invention and so on, is also not what Chimurenga is about. Chimurenga is more about giving the possibility for practice. And it’s not logocentric. It’s true that there is a publication and the production of texts and so on. But what is produced goes beyond the production of new utterances and new concepts. It’s really about investing in the place of practice. Every Chimurenga publication always comes with live performances. The idea of music is central here—music as something that thinks, that can inspire our intellectual labor. Chimurenga, in other words, is interested in keeping alive vibrations, movements that we inherit from the elders. Take for instance, again, the book on FESTAC. The book coincided with a jazz concert. It was a jazz concert that was about FESTAC, but it was also a composition performed right after FESTAC. The idea was to rehearse FESTAC, to bring that spirit back again. Through a book launch, we were making the past into a set of practices—of listening and being with music and being with community.

Audience

AD: If we are to think in terms of rehearsals, practices, and performances, then we are also presumably thinking with an audience. Mamadou mentioned Sembène’s aspired audience in the choice to make films. Who would you say is your audience? And how do you think of audience?

BK: The way I approach performance in my work is not just through cacophony but also through a sort of ventriloquism. I’m thinking of what Pasolini tried to define as the cinema of poetry based on the idea of free indirect speech, which allowed multiple voices to be spoken at once. It was also meant to answer the question, who speaks when someone speaks in a cinematic work? It might seem like a strange question, but in my opinion it’s crucial, especially when dealing with history, and the history of those whose history was suppressed. One can think of free indirect speech and film as a platform where multiple voices all speak together, spoken by someone who bears witness to those who cannot speak for themselves. The very moment when the work is produced therefore speaks to how the

past manifests itself within the present. It can also, again, speak to the potential future. That’s why, in my work, there is no professional performer. There are only the ones who are willing to speak for themselves and who also accept the burden of the collective voice. They know that they are speaking for others who cannot speak, including those coming from the past. So there is cacophony and there is also ventriloquism—the multiple being spoken by one. But that one is the many. That one is already a community, potentially. And that is exactly how I approach an audience.

I do exhibitions in museums, and in that I am very lucky because many visitors of my shows are not museumgoers. Or they are not the usual museumgoers. It’s a conversation that I have had many times—not necessarily with curators, but with the people who are responsible for taking care of the museum. They tell me how they observe audiences engaging with my shows. From a strategic perspective, I would say that if I still do shows in museums, it’s because I know that it will bring an audience to museums that is not the audience of the museum, and that my work will be the door that will draw them inside. Most of the time, they are the ones who are excluded from the museum.

I believe that the beauty of an exhibition space is that it gathers people. They can talk to each other there. As someone who works with video, I don’t mind if people talk and comment while watching videos. On the contrary, I tend to enjoy the fact that the conversation has already started at the very moment when they are watching the work. Cinema doesn’t allow one to do so. Although the museum is still considered a space for elites, paradoxically enough, people talk and watch in museums. They go from one thing to the other in museums, and they can go back if the ticket is not too expensive. Unfortunately, a cinema theater doesn’t allow such an experience and such interactions between members of the audience. If it does, it’s only after and not during the film.

This all resembles the civic apparatus of the *halqa* that I was describing before. The museum is also a space of interaction with the storyteller. The audience can interrupt and comment on the story, or even make suggestions to make the story better. They can talk to each other as well, and they talk to each other during the performance. If I still do exhibitions in museums, it’s because I hope that it can be, at least for the duration of an exhibition, a potential civic space. As you can see, I am not answering the question about who my audience is. I am rather describing what can happen when an audience is formed, when viewers are brought together. That’s actually what I mean by an audience.

SD: What Bouchra is saying resonates with me. For me, it's less about who the audience is and more about what they *do*. I think it was Jean-Luc Godard who said that the image isn't created; it's produced. In other words, images—or words, or ideas for that matter—are produced by the people who engage them because it is the world that gives images, words, and ideas life, traction, and resonance. So who comes to engage them, and what do they do in that process? That labor, that work is interesting to me. Fanon said, “Every spectator is either a coward or a traitor,”⁸ and I've always been drawn to the potential inherent in that because it has compelled me to think about what it means for someone—or a collective—to go through a process that unsettles them and their positionalities. Cultural work can create a kind of tension that I think is generative because we know that viewers, readers, and listeners are themselves carriers of history, and that each brings their own baggage to what they're engaging with. In my work, there's a hope that out of an engagement with the written word or image, a different kind of ethical subject can emerge.

MD: Sembène was able to make the decision to make films rather than write books because he wanted to reach a popular audience. I'm not sure that the films that Sembène did are possible in today's Africa. I don't think a filmmaker today would receive funding to do those kinds of films—films that are very much political, very much preoccupied with questions of memory on the continent. His decisions as to the sort of audience he wants to reach also informs his form, which, as I was saying earlier, is very much straight to the point. He is not trying to impress us with very elaborate filmic language.

The work that Chimurenga publishes is far removed from the NGO discourse that receives support in today's Africa. It's hard to turn what Chimurenga produces into an accessible object. But contrary to Sembène, Chimurenga is very much attached to form as a vehicle of meaning. This has much to do with the landscape in today's Africa; it's not the sixties and seventies when different African countries sponsored state-funded cultural projects. To take FESTAC, again, as an example. It was a very special gathering. It was a meeting place for a very wide definition of what the Black world is, much more expansive than preceding Pan-African art festivals, not because of ideological factors, but because of what Nigeria was at that time. The fact that the military dictatorship was sitting on all that oil money gave them the ability to expand the definition of Blackness to include people from India, Papua New Guinea, and so on. As state-funded cultural projects vanish today, money comes from either foreign cultural

agencies, mostly European, or NGOs. Certain types of discourse get to be funded and can reach a wider audience because they have the means to distribute as well.

Because of the moment in which it appears Chimurenga has to make that choice of being the sort of object that it is. I think the audience is quite educated and quite limited. But the audience is also all the possibilities of now and tomorrow. If I just said that, however, it would have been too easy of an answer. We have to consider the fact that *Chimurenga* might be more widely distributed in the North than it is on the continent.

BK: I think Sembène was very much conscious of the contradictions—of producing African cinema for Africans partly funded with European money and not widely distributed in West Africa. And I think one of the reasons why the FESTAC was funded was because of those very circumstances, because there was no spot in West Africa where African filmmakers could meet each other and talk to one another, to show their own films to a West African audience and a North African audience as well. The contradictions you're elaborating with respect to *Chimurenga* are actually very similar to the ones faced by Sembène. In that regard, *Chimurenga* is still caught in a postcolonial time that obliges us to think the question of who is our audience, and how to reach the audience that we consider to be our audience.

I can say the same thing about my work—that it is mostly shown in Western museums, certainly more than in North African museums. This is partly because we have more museums in the West. How do you show these works in places where there are still no art institutions and places to speak about art, and where cinemas are closing one after another? In Tangiers only two cinemas are still open. In Casablanca, there is only one, and it's a multiplex and will never show arthouse cinema. The question of the audience is also the question of the spaces where our audience can meet in the first place.

AAA: When we speak about the audience, we assume that we have finished something that is now going to be delivered to an audience. Processes of unlearning enable us to alter the question to: *to* whom do we speak, *with* whom do we speak, and *with* whom do we unlearn? Its immediate consequence in relation to academic knowledge, for example, is how to replace the incentives for new or groundbreaking individual work with collective and communal engagement toward the abolition of imperial infrastructures through a reorientation of academic—or other institutional—commitment, from commitment to disciplines to commitment to repair, reparations, and return.

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Notes

1. *Souffles*, which means "breath" in French, is the title of an experimental journal of culture and politics published in Morocco in the late 1960s and early 1970s. For an anthology of translations, see Harrison and Villa-Ignacio, *Souffles-Anfas*.
2. Tahir, "The Containment Zone." Mahmud, "Colonial Cartographies, Postcolonial Borders, and Enduring Failures of International Law."
3. FESTAC or FESTAC '77 refers to the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Cultures, held in Lagos, Nigeria between January and February 1977.
4. Azoulay, *Potential History*, 17.
5. For the critique of Jameson, see West, "Ethics and Action." The phrase "slaughterhouse of history" recurs in various speeches and oral remarks. See, e.g., West, "Abiding."
6. Césaire, *Notebook*, 47.
7. Editors' Note: The line is from Pasolini's "Poesia in forma di rosa," dated June 12, 1962. The portion referred to reads: "I am a force of the Past / My love lies only in tradition. / I come from the ruins, the churches, / the altarpieces, the villages / abandoned in the Apennines or foothills / of the Alps where my brothers once lived. / I wander like a madman down the Tuscolana, / down the Appia like a dog without a master." Sartarelli, *Pasolini*, 311–13.
8. Fanon, *Wretched*, 199.

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